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Review of Nature's Altars: Mountains, Gender, and American Environmentalism, by S. Schrepfer

Mark T. Tebeau

Cleveland State University, M.TEBEAU@csuohio.edu

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Therefore origins often counted for more than the actual position a person occupied in society at a given moment or even over a considerable period of time. This has a curious ring to it given the persecutions, liabilities, and benefits the Bolsheviks conferred according to attributed hereditary class origins. On this basis, she argues that the Bolsheviks "invented" their own notion of class, and therefore inadvertently encouraged the populace to create favorable class identities. It is interesting to compare Fitzpatrick's treatment with that in an excellent recent monograph by Diane Koenker, *Republic of Labor: Russian Printers and Soviet Socialism, 1918–1930* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005). Whereas Fitzpatrick portrays the Bolsheviks as the driving force in creating notions of class or in provoking inventions on that score, Koenker shows how powerfully the idea of class resonated with workers in the printing industry and how these workers used or at least tried to use their deeply held notions of class to defend themselves against the Soviet bureaucracy.

Among Fitzpatrick's case studies, the most interesting are perhaps a series of essays on women's identity, particularly that of women with problematic identities. Thus she describes a certain Anastasia, who claimed to come from a poor family of peasant carpenters but was then accused during the 1930s of belonging in fact to a family of rich peasants. Another essay concerns women's autobiographies from the 1920s through 1990s, which not surprisingly reflected a sense of victimization. A third focuses on the tales wives told about their problems in letters and complaints to the authorities. In this essay, based largely on Party archives from Latvia, she shows how women complained about adulterous husbands and other family difficulties. The interesting fact in all these essays is how much the population was inclined to look to the state for one thing or another, even their own sense of a social identity.

The book concludes with some brief reflections on the post-communist era and post-Soviet forms of social identity, from Businessman or woman to New Russian. The collection will be of considerable interest to scholars in the field and to graduate students.

Johns Hopkins University

Jeffrey Brooks

Nature's Altars: Mountains, Gender, and American Environmentalism. By Susan Schrepfer (Lawrence, KS: University of Kansas Press, 2005. 316 pp. \$35).

In *Nature's Altars: Mountains, Gender, and American Environmentalism*, Susan Schrepfer explores how men and women understood mountains in the century following the Civil War. *Nature's Altars* both recasts how we view mountains and also takes fuller account of how gender has mattered in the history of the environment.

Schrepfer begins her story in the years following the Civil War, when modern understandings of the mountains first emerged as Americans "discovered" the west and its treasures. One of the most immediate ways that gender found expression was in the process of naming the environment. Men did the naming and

with few exceptions identified most topographies with references to male conquerors of the environment. Those landscapes given feminine names were frequently sexualized. Over time, into the early twentieth century, this trend grew more pronounced and female-named places received newer masculine names. And, the higher the mountain, the more likely that it was to have received a manly name. Women's names, meanwhile were more likely to be given to bodies of water, because they provided beauty and adornment to the craggy manhood of the mountains. Naming the vertical spaces of the environment in this fashion mirrored broader understandings of nature, including conceptions of class and ethnicity as well. It is not surprising that middle-class professional men—those who did most of the naming—believed that they understood nature better than most of the folks who actually lived there, whether Native American or working-class.

The system of naming reflected the mixed emotions with which men approached mountains, with fear and trepidation but also seeking to dominate and protect. In these reactions, Schrepfer convincingly argues men's language was built on Victorian understandings of manhood, as well as broader Western conceptions of the body. Embedded in all this was a sense that nature was feminine, and to control it, like controlling one's body, was an act of manliness. As mountaineers struggled to come to terms with women, nature, and society, they developed a ritualistic approach to the sport of alpinism, as well as a convention for describing the sublime heights of the mountains.

For women, the language of domesticity emerged full of ambivalence during the Victorian era, becoming no less contradictory in the twentieth century. As "new women" became more assertive, taking on more difficult climbs and shedding skirts, the frame of mountains as a "home and garden" became the dominant trope. And, then, in the 1930s, women abruptly disappeared from the mountains, clubs, and public face of alpinism; ironically, the language of "feminine sublime" may have become more ingrained in the culture. Ultimately the masculine approach to nature would come to define the wilderness experience at the middle of the twentieth century. Building on the Victorian ideals—and in the context of the industrial economy with its middle-class offices—men emphasized defeating nature by disciplining themselves and through individual achievements made with a team of other men.

A master of sources with a clear narrative voice, Schrepfer's analysis is both compelling and occasionally surprising. Throughout Schrepfer mines wide-ranging and diverse sources, although the vast majority is taken from the writing of middle-class professionals—an approach justified in no small part by the importance of those elites in writing about the mountains and defining the direction of the environmental movement. Schrepfer's analysis is both compelling and refreshing. At a time when too much gender scholarship asserts that gender matters—with authors regurgitating theory or imposing it on their narratives—Schrepfer builds her argument from the source material itself. Not only does she carefully make the case that gender matters, but also reveals *how* it mattered. Reveling in contradictions, subtle historical changes, and evolving social norms, Schrepfer allows her sources to guide her discussion. We hear, as we read, the ways that men and women approached gender in different ways, and the subtleties in their approaches. This complexity emerges in, for example, John Muir's

encounters with Yosemite and Mary Austin's celebrations of the Sierra, as well as in the book's own encounters with the narratives of the men and women who wrote about the mountains. They may have acted within broad frames, but Schrepfer's protagonists always experience the wilderness in the fullest, most unrestrained ways.

In the decades after World War II, as mountains and wilderness became separated from urban and developed landscapes, as they became threatened by expansion, the environmental movement appropriated elements of the masculine message of conquering nature and the female message of nature as home and garden. They claimed that wilderness was worth protecting, of saving from human encroachment, building such claims on gendered understandings of the wilderness. Mountains, like the American West more broadly, began to experience greater and greater pressures from social and economic development during the course of the twentieth century, but gender, according to Schrepfer was no less potent in shaping the mountains and the environmental movement. On this final point, Schrepfer's argument is somewhat less convincing. She seems to be on less firm ground here, as the particular gendered components would appear, to me, to have become less important than overarching societal pressures on development. Yet, there is no doubt that gendered understandings of wilderness mattered in shaping environmentalism.

Nature's Altars reaches the heights to which it aspires. Schrepfer listens and interprets conversations about wilderness, crafting a book that informs our understanding of how gender shaped the environment. I will never again read the mountains—either in my experiences or through the writings of others—in the same way.